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THE FOREST PEOPLE OF BRITISH GUIANA. *

BY

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2.—THE INDIANS.

The Guiana Indian is a fit denizen of the lonely forests and creeks in which he lives his quiet life. His colour is brown as the coffee-like waters on which he paddles his canoe; it harmonises also with the rich humus over which he glides and the tree-trunks that support the green forest roof. His clothing consists only of a blue loin-cloth or *lap*, and in the case of the woman of a pretty bead apron; their colours hardly make any impression. If protective coloration is a fact, of which there appears to be no doubt, then the Indian of South America is as well fitted to his habitat as the wild animals are to theirs.

Now and again you meet a party in town obviously unfitted to such an environment. They walk along the streets one behind another, perhaps headed by one with a tall hat above his brown body, naked save for the inch or two of *lap*. Nigro boys jeer at them from a distance, and the clerks in the stores look at the women and smile at each other. The party march into a store, they look around, enquire the price of the article they want if it is visible, if not, go on farther. The salesmen call the men "Master John" and the women "Miss Mary," or else use the word "*Moi*" (brother); but hardly any one cares to pick up even a few words of their language. All trading is done by signs, and if you buy any curios you must offer money, a shilling at a time, until the seller is content with the number.

* Continued from BULLETIN No. 3.

At home, however, the Indian is obviously in his element. I have slept under their benabs many times and have always felt comfortable. Everything there is at your disposal, and, unlike some other native races, they do not pilfer. Such a crime as theft is quite unknown among them; you cannot steal from them, nor they from you. As, however, you need not hesitate to take or use whatever is at hand, you must expect that they will at least examine your belongings. Take this in good part and you will never have any trouble.

I recall with pleasure one of my trips to an Indian settlement which is now deserted and its site almost unapproachable. For six hours I had paddled up stream and was almost worn out as I entered the little branch of the creek where lay a dug-out and two wood-skins. I pushed my bateau as near as the shallow water would permit, and by means of one of the canoes got ashore dryshod.

Before me was a low bank, up which went a narrow path wet with the trickle of water oozing from the sparkling white sand and bordered with moss. No person was to be seen, nor until I reached the top was there any sign of man's presence. Here, however, a benab or palm-roofed shed came in sight, and I was greeted by the barking of a dog—a tiny creature made up of skin and bones. Inside the benab sat an old, old woman weaving a cotton hammock, but she took no notice of my arrival. The bobbin went in and out among the network, and even when I spoke she only pointed to the bush track behind, meaning, as I supposed, that the other people were gone that way.

Getting nothing more from her, I took my way through the path which led over the reef for half a mile, and then suddenly dipped to a lower level. Here I came upon the provision ground of the settlement, in which half a dozen women and girls, with one boy, were working. The boy knew enough English to understand that I was come to spend the night with them, and they all seemed pleased, in their quiet way, when they understood.

While they were digging up cassava and chopping down weeds—cutlasses their only implement—I strolled over the place, which was about an acre in extent. The soil was a yellowish sandy marl, rather wet from the ooze from the sand-reef, which added to its fertility. Surrounded by the high woods, of which it had evidently formed a part barely a year ago, it was something entirely different to what is generally understood by a field. True, there was a hedge; but what a tall one! Towering to a height of eighty to a hundred feet, and festooned with creepers, it reminded me somewhat of the interior

of some ruined castle hung with trailing ivy. There were no beds, no drains, no paths. Scattered in every direction lay the charred trunks of the forest giants which once occupied the space. Some were piled one above another to a height of eight to twelve feet. Here and there were a few square feet of soil, and in these spaces the cassava was growing. Already, however, the great trunks were being broken up by wood-ants, and as I walked along them—the only way of inspecting the field—they crunched under my feet. Once I sunk three feet among the ruins of what had probably been a decayed trunk before its fall.

Everywhere there were weeds. They crawled from the border of the clearing in the shape of scrambling creepers, pushed themselves through between the dead logs, and fought with each other and the cassava plants for room to live. The women chopped away a few, but no doubt they had long learned how difficult was the task of keeping them down altogether.

Presently the loaded "wieries" were taken up, and one woman after another filed off for the benab with her load of cassava. I could not but sympathise with them, although, probably, they thought this tight band across the forehead and a load of fifty pounds on the bent back of little consequence. At first sight it looked as if the band would make a weal, but as the women bent forward I could see that there was but little strain on the head.

I followed them with the boy, who, man-like, carried no load. We talked about hunting and fishing as well as we could, but his vocabulary of English was very small. Labbas and acouries were common; now and then an ant bear or howling monkey was shot, and parrots came to certain trees every morning.

Arrived at the benab, he brought out his bow, and, as the starved apology for a dog was wandering about, he let fly with a blunt-headed arrow and gave the poor creature a severe poke between the ribs. I knew it was useless to speak of cruelty to this budding huntsman, for if he understood my words his mind could not take in their meaning. Then he took me down the hill to show me his own special woodskin, which his father had made for him, and the pretty ornamental paddle, which just fitted his little hands.

Again in the benab, I hung my hammock where there was plenty of room and sat down. The women were now busy. One fanned the smouldering logs until they blazed up, put on the pepper pot, and laid some cakes of cassava bread to toast, while the others commenced to grate the roots they had just brought in. The boy offered me the pepper pot, but I shook my head, and pointed to a

joint of barbecued labba which hung to the rafters. Indian stew with cassareep and peppers (capsicums) is undoubtedly very nice, but after what the boy had said about monkeys I was suspicious. The fingers of these creatures are sufficiently like those of a human baby to spoil the best civilized appetite. Fortunately there were no drinks ready, or I might have given offence by refusing a calabash of piwarree or casseerie. When it is understood that these are prepared mainly by chewing cassava bread and roots and spitting the mess into vessels with water, every one but an Indian will understand why they would be rejected.

The process of preparing cassava bread is very ingenious yet at the same time simple. After grating on a board studded with broken quartz, the pulp, which is a virulent poison, is placed in a long wicker strainer, probably suggested by the muscular construction of a snake. By pressing down the "matapee" it is shortened and filled, then it is hung up and a weight put upon the lower part, which draws it out to double the length and at the same time presses out the juice. By evaporation the juice becomes cassareep and the pulp the material for cassava bread; in both cases the poison is eliminated by the cooking. The bread is like flat pancakes and is baked upon circular dishes, once of stone or pottery, now of iron. When freshly toasted it has a nutty flavour, but otherwise it is tough and comparable to pressed sawdust.

Having enjoyed my dinner, I took a walk round the benab. The place was too barren for food plants, but there was quite a large patch of red lilies (*Hippeastrum equestre*), and on the slope grew quite a collection of ornamental foliage plants (*Caladiums*). These beenas, as they are called, are found everywhere about the Indian settlements, and are used as charms to promote success in hunting. The suffused crimson caladium, so well known in English conservatories, is used by the tiger (jaguar) hunter. To be successful, he must make several cuts on his breast or arms and rub the acrid juice of the tuber into the wounds. Other varieties are used in a similar way, each for its own particular species of game.

Presently the men came in from hunting, one carrying an ant bear and another a labba. They took little notice of my presence, handed the game to the women, and then threw themselves into their hammocks. I tried to speak to them, but no one knew English, and nothing was left, therefore, but to remain quiet.

As night fell the women also left their work and lay down just as they were. There was no undressing, and therefore nothing to shock the feelings. I could not but notice that, although almost

naked, they were quite modest in their ways. Of course it was dark under the benab, for it was only slightly lit by the glow of the wood fire at one end. Now and then a few words were spoken by one to another, but there was nothing like the chattering that goes on when two or three negroes get together at night.

Soon all was quite still. Only the hum of insect life could be heard, the everlasting voice of the tropical night.

I slept soundly, and woke at daybreak to find that the men were up and ready to go out. Spring hooks had been placed at different places in the creek, and they were going to see what had been caught. Feeling interested in their work, I took my bateau and followed, but with all my efforts was soon left far behind. Other objects, however, soon interested me; orchids were plentiful, and made me almost forget my Indian friends. Should I remain longer or go down to the mouth of the creek, where my stock of provisions and other necessities were? The creature comforts turned the scale; I missed my morning coffee, and was soon paddling down stream.

It had been hard work against the stream; now it was correspondingly easy. The tide was running out at the mouth of the creek, and, as I got near, the bateau rushed along at a glorious pace. Yet there was an element of danger, for on the bottom lay hundreds of fallen logs—tacoubas, as they are called—smooth as boulders and almost as hard. Round each bend I rushed, eyes in front and hands rigid, to keep her head from splitting on these snags. Fortunately, I succeeded without mishap, and was soon inside a troolie hut enjoying my breakfast.

There may be a certain pleasure in companionship on such excursions, but, after all, close observations of nature cannot be carried out when there is a large company. Rarely indeed can you find one congenial friend; they are sportsmen, photographers, or, more generally, simply young fellows on the spree.

On one occasion I went with a party of a dozen in a steam launch to visit an Indian Mission on Masaruni river. We started on Saturday evening from Georgetown, and almost immediately, instead of trying to sleep, most of them took to drinking. By midnight they were quieter, for their potations were producing the natural effect, and I went to sleep to the churning of the screw.

Early on Sunday morning we arrived at Bartica, now an important little town as a starting-point for the gold diggings, but then a very small village, mostly peopled by bovianders. We walked about here for an hour or two and then went on, arriving at the

Indian Mission about noon. The landing was occupied by about a score of dug-outs and woodskins of all sizes, from that just suited to a child to those that, in quiet water, would carry a dozen persons.

Not a single person was to be seen anywhere; and when we got up the slope the reason was obvious. They were all in the church—an open shed with its palm thatch sloping down to about six feet from the ground at the sides. From within came the voice of the preacher. I advised my companions not to go near, for fear of disturbing the congregation.

This did not suit them; they wanted to see an Indian religious service. Far from their ideas, however, was anything like a quiet entrance of the church. No; they must stand up at one of the open sides and draw attention from the preacher. I fancy he must have hurried to close the service, for very shortly the Indians came forth, followed immediately by the person in question—a black catechist. At once he broke forth with a volley of remonstrances mingled with abuse. What were they doing there on the Sabbath disturbing the poor Indians? They ought to be ashamed of themselves. Their skins were white but their hearts were black (of course he transposed two of these words for his own case).

To tell the truth, I was ashamed of their manners, and went off into the forest, where, quite alone with nature, I enjoyed an hour's quiet walk. Returning with several new plants, I found that my companions had quite demoralized the place. It is true that many of the Indians had left in their canoes, but there still remained those who lived at the Mission and some of their friends. To make some of these drunk and to watch their behaviour in such a condition seemed to be the aim of one or two of my companions. They were out for a spree and must make the best of it according to their ideas. But what was play to them was death to these people, and, knowing the probable result, I tried to reason with the tempters. As might be expected, this was useless, and I again went into the bush until the steamer signalled for our departure.

I believe the Mission station referred to is now abandoned. What has become of the Indians it is hard to tell. Some, probably, have died from rum given them by gold diggers, others are dispersed in many directions. Every year they become fewer and fewer, and unless they can be kept away from the white man and his drink they must ultimately die out altogether.

3.—CHINESE AND EAST INDIANS.

Besides the bucks and bovianders we find a few Chinese and

East Indians in the Guiana forest. These people were originally introduced to the colony as indentured coolies, and, having worked for five years on the plantations, became free to settle where they chose.

The Chinese never relished the work of the cane-field, although some of them make fairly good agriculturists when working on their own account. What they like is shopkeeping, and in the towns and villages they compete with the Madeiran. The opium traffic is naturally under their control, but here and there they own rum-shops, and among the bovianders they are almost the only shopkeepers.

The opium trade is one from which the Colonial Government derives a fair revenue, notwithstanding some absurd restrictions which are supposed to regulate the sale, but are really little better than instruments of oppression. For about twenty years a law was in force that, if carried out, would have been absolutely prohibitive, yet at that very time a druggist paid duty on as much as six hundred pounds of opium every month. Every druggist was allowed to import as much as he pleased, and licensed retailers bought from them. But the difficulty was that only five grains could be legally bought by one person. The opium smoker does not use the drug in a crude state, and he must have at least half an ounce to prepare his extract. It followed, therefore, that not a single ounce of the one to two thousand pounds imported monthly was disposed of in a legal manner.

A great deal has been said at different times about the evils of opium smoking; but, after all, there is little harm in it. The particular vice of the negro is rum-drinking, under the influence of which he fights and quarrels; such a thing never happens after the Chinamen's dissipation. There does not seem to be any injury whatever from opium smoking—certainly nothing like that from drunkenness. I have met very many Chinamen who were much addicted to the habit and never found one of them in anything like the condition of the sodden beer-drinker or even the brandy tippler.

Judging by the quantity of opium imported, nearly every Chinaman in the colony must be a smoker. Yet they are not particularly unhealthy, nor do they die at an early age. Beyond everything they are clear-headed and sharp bargainers. To know them is to appreciate their good qualities, which are many.

Possibly, however, the Celestial may be a different person in China and other countries, for even during the last thirty years he has improved. He was once a peculiarly adroit thief, examples of

which have come within my own knowledge. His word for steal is *qui-si*, and when you put a few samples of opium before him and said, "Now, Ching, no *qui-si*," he would put on that well-known smile, "so child-like and bland." A stranger might even think you were insulting him. But no; the only wrong in his stealing is being found out. Put five pieces of opium before him and watch carefully. First he picks at each with his long finger nails until perhaps a quarter of an ounce has been abstracted, and then you suddenly find that only four pieces remain. Of course he has taken it, but when charged with the theft he only says, "Me no sabbee." That answer won't do for the opium dealer, and presently, with the aid of a porter, the missing lump is found under an armpit or up one of Ching's sleeves.

One of his ingenious ways of breaking into a shop was by sawing a hole just large enough to creep through. I remember two drug-gists' stores being robbed in this manner. Opium was, of course, the whole end and aim of the thief.

Pigs and fowls were never safe from the Chinamen's depredations. A story is told of a most ingenious theft of the latter. The fowls roosted in a calabash tree close to the house of their owner, and the difficulty was to capture them without disturbing the inmates. This was accomplished by quietly sawing off the trunk and removing the head to a distance, where the roosters could be removed without risk. A Chinaman whom I once taxed with fowl-stealing admitted that the temptation was very great. His words were, "Suppose me see 'em fowl, damn, *must qui-si*; don't care." As feathered stock is hardly ever penned, the opportunities for capturing one or two on the street are numerous.

The negro hates every race but his own. He pretends to despise the Chinaman and East Indian coolie, and speaks with scorn of the Madeira "Portugee." Even a "buccra" who works for his living in any other way than one which he considers gentlemanly is contemptible. The Madeiran as a shopkeeper is somewhat cringing, but he will dispute with his customers now and then; the Chinaman takes all the abuse showered upon him without a sign of resentment. Like water on a duck's back, it does not affect him in the least. He never quarrels with people of other races, and hardly ever disputes with his "matties." In this respect he differs entirely from the East Indian, to whom the legal gentlemen of the colony owe a large share of their practice.

In his quiet and inoffensive manner he approaches the native Indian more than any other race, and when you see him in the

bush, were it not for his pigtail and blue trousers, he might be easily mistaken for the true denizen of the forest. But, although apparently so closely allied, he does not mingle with the bucks. In the huts of the bovianders we commonly see Indian women, but I have never met with them among the Chinese.

On the Camarine Creek is a settlement of these people which was commenced over thirty years ago. Taken altogether, it may be pronounced a success. In the forest, not far from an Indian village, they have put up their houses and laid out provision fields. Unlike their neighbours, the Chinese are, above everything, industrious. Always busy, their little homesteads are pictures of cleanliness and thrift. Not a weed is allowed to grow among the rice and eddoes, the surroundings of the house are free from bush, and even the hog-pen is washed twice a day.

On the opposite side of the river is a boviander village, where, in poky huts, among a wilderness of bushes and weeds, about fifty families are living. Notwithstanding the example of the Indian's open benab, these people, like the East Indians, like their dwellings to be low and thatched down to the ground, except an open space in front, where cooking can be carried on in wet weather. Often without windows or openings of any kind, these musty-smelling bedrooms are quite unfit for those in good health, but when they are occupied by the sick they are simply disgusting. In passing up the river once, I called upon a man who was lying in such a place, and when, on my return, I found that he was dead and that someone was taking down the boards of the partition to make a box, I said, "No wonder."

At the Chinese settlement things are quite different. There are proper landings, where you do not run the risk of slipping into water or mud, and as you get up a clean path lies before you. The house is high, like the Indian benab, but it differs in having walls of close palisading, through the chinks of which light and air enter freely. A good drain is dug to catch the drip from the eaves, and, as a consequence, instead of the damp floor black with fungus or green with moss that you see over the way, the well-beaten mud floor is quite dry. You do not detect that damp reek so well known in boviander huts, nor is there anything objectionable about the whole place. Even if there is a pig-stye to windward this is no nuisance. The floor is raised about two feet from the earth and several trenches underneath and on every side carry off everything obnoxious.

The Chinaman does not use a hammock. His bed is a mat laid

on boards like a broad berth on board ship. Between each sleeping-place and in front are curtains, which, though apparently never washed, are not so dirty as might be thought. There is neither bed nor pillows as we understand these articles, but a log of wood that reminds you of the headsman's block of old times takes the place of the latter and the mat of the former. Here Ching lies or lolls to smoke his opium or tobacco, with plenty of room to stretch his limbs. His wife, when he has one, appears to be even more quiet than himself, and he seems to keep her out of the way of strangers. On one occasion when, in the company of two or three ladies, I visited a house the mistress made herself quite friendly, only, however, to get a wigging from her husband. After that she kept in the background, and he brought our cups of tea himself.

Tea is, of course, the universal drink, and, as far as I have seen, they do not indulge in spirits. Every visitor is offered one of his tiny cups, "cold without," and it is always clean and nice-flavoured. As for his edibles, I have never had occasion to try them. No doubt they are good enough, but somehow or other a plate of minced meat of which you know nothing and which he eats with chop-sticks is not inviting. There is a general opinion that he likes his meat rather gamey. Some of the articles imported to the colony from China are certainly repellent; for example, dried ducks, which smell like old skins, and a sort of cabbage something like sourkraut. These things are, however, matters of taste.

The Chinaman is undoubtedly a connoisseur of good eating. Some years ago, before he had his own shops, he was a good customer to the grocery stores. Vermicelli, biscuits, prunes, and tinned meats were bought in large quantities, especially for their New Year's festivities.

The people at the Chinese settlement are Christians, and are under the care of a catechist. It is curious to hear them singing some old well-known hymn tune. The syllables fit a sing-song air very well, but do not run so smoothly in chanting. Those who do not profess Christianity keep a picture behind an altar, in front of which they burn joss-sticks. The most conspicuous part of this portrait, which is that of a very stout man with a moustache and beard, is the abdomen; possibly there may be a meaning in this connected with the Chinaman's fondness for good living.

East Indian coolies are sometimes to be seen among the bovanders, but, as a rule, they do not take to the negro or coloured man. On one occasion I gave a passage to town to one of them coming from the Chinese settlement, and was much interested with

his report. He had been engaged by a Chinaman as a labourer for three months and was now taking his first holiday, evidently pleased with himself and his late employers. Above everything else the coolie likes a man who gives him regular work and, as a matter of course, pays him fair wages. Such people he had just left. If there was not enough work for him on one clearing he was passed to the next, so that he spent no idle days, and now had enough money in his pocket to buy a cow. His account of his employers confirmed my favourable impression of them, and made me think what a pity it was that the boviander was not like them.

It is rather strange that no free immigration into British Guiana has taken place, especially in view of the fact that Chinese play some very queer tricks to get into the United States. It is true that our colony is on the wrong side of America; but as the cost of transport is continually being reduced, it might be supposed that if these people can get to New York they can also reach Demerara. The colony is well known, for several well-to-do Chinamen have gone back with money, and there are two or three firms with connections in Hong Kong.

Largely on account of this isolation, the Demerara Chinaman is becoming creolised. The rising generation no longer wear pig-tails; they go to school and gain good positions in class. The girls wear frocks and trimmed hats of the latest style, losing entirely that picturesque character which seemed to suit their mothers. Now and again we see the wife of some shopkeeper dressed in silk trousers and the long, shapeless gown which give such an impression of coolness and suitability to the tropics. These look very well, but the ordinary plain purplish-brown robe, like the man's blouse, but longer, is by no means becoming.

It is interesting to note here that the Chinaman has little taste in colour as far as dress is concerned. He, however, likes expensive silks and other good materials, and the general result is pleasing. Although not so picturesque as the East Indian, the Chinese woman often impresses you with the idea that she dresses to suit the climate. Yet there is not the least suggestion of indecency or nakedness; on the contrary, notwithstanding the trousers, there is a stern severity, hardly attractive enough to suit any European female but an old maid. No doubt the race was developed in cold climates, where something like a cloak of furs or other thick material in winter gave place to a similar loose dress in summer.

The only people in British Guiana who dress to suit the climate are the East Indians. The European is, perhaps, the most absurd.

The more respectable man's dress, which is aped by the negro on Sunday, is the black coat and tall hat of the old country, although he is well aware that a loose white jacket and straw head covering are better in every respect. As for the white ladies, they suffer greatly because they will wear everything tight. The consequence is that, as there is no recognised form of loose dress, they spend most of the day in their bedrooms, and, after going out, hurry there at once to relieve themselves from their torture. The Chinese woman has no difficulty of that sort, for the deformed feet are not known here; neither does the East Indian woman suffer from any such evils.